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DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: ISTANBUL CONFERENCE TACKLES TURKEY'S "KURDISH PROBLEM"

Classified By: Consul General Deborah K. Jones for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. A March 11-12 Istanbul conference on "Turkey's Kurdish Problem" brought together a range of leading figures from Turkey's Kurdish community with the ambitious goal of hammering out an alternative to the leadership of imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan. Organizers argued that the time was ripe for such an initiative, crediting both the changed situation in Northern Iraq -- where organizers anticipated an autonomous "Kurdistan" -- and Turkey's own increasing openness to addressing difficult and sensitive issues. While no concrete platform emerged, participants were united in condemning the PKK and declaring that the period for armed struggle is over. Chastened by past experience, however, there was also a largely unspoken consensus that the Kurdish problem in Turkey will not be resolved in the near future. End Summary.

AGAINST VIOLENCE AND EXTREME NATIONALISM

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¶2. (C) The crucial question before the March 11-12 conference on civic and democratic resolution for Kurds in Turkey, according to Bilgi University Professor and local Helsinki Assembly Chairman Murat Belge, was whether Turkey's Kurds will continue to take direction from Ocalan, or whether they will begin to organize themselves around some new leader and modified principles. Participants were united in their advocacy of peaceful change through a democratic and voluntary alliance. In the run-up to the event, Belge told us the conference aimed to bring together exceptional, "non-Ocalan people," who, though divergent in opinion, would work toward a platform independent of Ocalan's influence. These people sensed a changed situation anticipating an autonomous "Kurdistan" in Northern Iraq.

¶3. (SBU) In the event, the two-day program largely tracked with organizers' plans. On the opening panel, Sertac Bucak, founder and former chairman of the International Center for Kurdish Human Rights, accused the PKK of standing in the way of a democratic solution to the Kurdish problem and said the period of armed struggle was over. Other conference speakers criticised hyper-nationalism, both Turkish and Kurdish. While declaring the PKK an organization with no democratic legitimacy, Professor Ahmet Insel of Galatasaray University said Turkish and Kurdish nationalism both led in the wrong direction. Baskin Oran of Ankara University, Journalist Etyan Mahcupyan and others offered similar criticism. Musician Nilufer Akbal put it poignantly, "I want to sing in my mother tongue. I want to feel that I belong here.... I'm a Kurd but this is my land. I should have the right to perform my art in my country." Osman Baydemir, mayor of Diyarbakir, summarized the sentiments of many in praising

Prime Minister Erdogan's remarks last August that acknowledged the Kurdish question was a question for all Turks. Baydemir voiced his concern for the future if Turks and Kurds do not assume responsibility for solving the problems of Kurds together.

¶4. (SBU) The only discordant note was sounded by a number of media participants, who missed the earlier sessions and (incorrectly) criticized other participants for complaining about the PKK in private but not in the event's public fora. Syndicated columnist Mehmet Ali Birand added that Kurdish speakers at the conference were confused, not knowing what they really wanted.

¶5. (C) Comment: Like the Armenian conference before it, the March 11-12 Kurdish conference was testimony to the increasing willingness of Turks to tackle even the most sensitive and difficult issues that both divide and define them. The idea of using a two-day event to create an anti-Ocalan platform was undoubtedly overambitious and not a little naive. Yet the event did contribute to dialogue on the issue. The key will be what happens next, and whether the Kurdish leaders and intellectuals who gathered last weekend will continue the search to create a vehicle for their aspirations that steers well clear of its troubled forbearers. There was a clear sense among participants, both Kurdish and otherwise, that a resolution to Turkey's Kurdish problem will not come to pass in the foreseeable future. End comment.

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